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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000110

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR CA/FPP MARY ALICE NOYES

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KFRD CMGT CVIS AM

SUBJECT: J-1 SUMMER WORK AND TRAVEL CALLBACK

SURVEY RESULTS

¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified; please protect accordingly.

¶2. (U) Action request. Please see paragraph ¶10.

SUMMARY

¶3. (SBU) Post's Fraud Prevention Unit (FPU) performed a callback survey of all summer 2004 J-1 work and travel program participants traveling from Armenia. Despite new measures to combat fraud, the FPU confirmed that 33% of the program's 321 participants did not return to Armenia. Difficult as it is to believe, this rate of return is actually better than in previous years. A few programs in particular, Open Doors (OD), the International Exchange Center (IEC), and Youth Exchange Service (YES) had especially high percentages of participants who did not return to Armenia. Despite our best efforts, this program seems incurably vulnerable to fraud in Armenia, and we question whether it should continue here. End Summary.

BACKGROUND

¶4. (SBU) Post has had a long history of problems with J-1 work and travel programs. Previous call-back surveys have revealed high levels of overstay, ranging from 40-60%. For summer 2004 applicants, Post attempted a more thorough vetting of participants. Representatives from all of the sponsoring companies arranged a meeting with the GOAM Deputy Head of the Office of Visas and Foreign Registration (OVIR) and the outgoing Consul to protest the low issuance rates. Post continued to issue only 65% of J-1 work and travel applicants for the season.

METHODOLOGY

¶5. (SBU) FPU maintains a list of all Armenian nationals who receive J-1 visas for summer work and travel programs. This list is sorted by program sponsor and contains local phone numbers for almost every applicant. Each LES in the section called 50-80 of the numbers and requested to speak personally with the applicant. If the applicant was not available, the LES would continue to call until they either spoke personally with the applicant or were told that the applicant is no longer in Armenia. Entries with outdated numbers or no numbers were listed as inconclusive. The Fraud Prevention Manager (FPM) then calculated results based on this information for almost 100% of the population.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

¶6. (SBU) The summer 2004 work and travel programs in Armenia were the Armenian Center for Youth and Student International Relations and Exchanges (ACE), Armenian Center for International Cooperation (ACI), Armenia International Exchange Program (AIEP), International Exchange Center (IEC), Open Doors (OD), Youth Exchange Armenia (YEA), and Youth Exchange Service (YES).

ProgramTotal Overstay Inconclusive

ACE	81	20	6
ACI	33	8	3
AIEP	54	12	5
IEC	34	17	4
OD	19	13	3
YEA	23	7	6
YES	45	18	9

The total percentage of program participants still in the United States ranges from the 33% that are confirmed overstays up to 45% if all of those unable to be reached are in the United States. While the percentage of overstays has dropped from previous years, several programs (IEC, OD, and YES) have approximately half of their participants still in the United States.

FUNNY BUSINESS

¶7. (SBU) Due to the high number of overstays during previous work & travel seasons, FPM interviewed a few returned applicants about their application experiences with the sponsoring companies. Respondents alleged that some of these companies charged between USD 500 and 2000 per application. FPM also received a number of anonymous allegations via letter and telephone that many of these companies were charging a USD 30 "finger-scanning" charge to applicants after they received their visa, falsely claiming that the fee is intended to offset the costs of finger-scanning arrivals at ports of entry by US immigration inspectors.

¶8. (SBU) During this year's callback survey, FPM received a number of reports that unknown persons alleging to be from the U.S. Embassy were calling the families of overstayed applicants. These families were instructed to report in case of inquiries that, their relatives had returned. These reports came from families of applicants who traveled under the AIEP.

¶9. (SBU) FPM received one disturbing report that the family of one overstayed participant was called by YES and informed that they had to pay a fine of USD 3000 to compensate for the fact that their relative had not returned.

GUIDANCE REQUESTED

¶10. (SBU) Given the high number of overstayed participants, and the behavior of the companies sponsoring their travel, Post will be very reluctant to issue J-1 work and travel visas in the near future. Post requests guidance on how to address this issue. Above all, Post strongly recommends canceling the IEC, OD, YES and AIEP programs because of their excessive overstay rate and/or unethical practices.

EVANS